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SUBJECT: MEPI LESSONS LEARNED 2: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

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Sensitive But Unclassified. Handle Accordingly.

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Learning from early experience (reftel), MEPI has adopted a two-track approach to promoting reform in the Arab World: timely and flexible response to short-term reform opportunities are wedded to longer-term efforts at building and strengthening the next generation of democratic reformers. In this cable, we examine specific cases to see how we are faring on both tracks. In Lebanon, relatively strong civil society groups, a permissive operating environment, and our ability to seize on opportunities has led to successes on both the short- and long-term objectives. In Algeria, however, where conditions had seemed promising, a strategic plan to help improve democratic practices ahead of this year's elections had limited success due to government resistance and weak NGOs. On the longer-term track, MEPI has adapted a successful model of training and internships to a wide variety of new actors, including students, lawyers, journalists, and businesspeople, while supporting an Arab civil society umbrella group that is providing advanced training for democracy activists from around the region. Lessons learned from these and other MEPI experiences point to several essential ingredients for success:

- a strategic plan for supporting reform in each country that fits in the context of the overall relationship;
- capable, reliable local partners;
- good coordination among posts, NEA/PI and the Regional Office;
- flexibility in developing and executing programs;
- diplomatic efforts to beat the drum on the general reform message and occasionally to address specific obstacles to program activities; and
- persistent and consistent USG support, which will build momentum for the long run and underscore the seriousness of our commitment.

End Summary.

¶2. (U) This is the second in a series of four cables by the MEPI Regional Office in Tunis, based on three years of supporting MEPI activities from Morocco to Lebanon. The other cables are:

- Overview (reftel)
- Public Diplomacy (septel)
- Small Grants - the Secret Weapon (septel)

Lebanon

13. (SBU) The MEPI poster child for responding to reform opportunities is Lebanon. Lebanese civil society is among the best developed in the region and faces relatively few constraints to its activities by either government officials or law. Thus, in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination in February 2005, working closely with a well organized and committed Embassy team, NEA/PI and the Tunis Regional Office (RO) were able to move quickly to set up a number of MEPI programs to reinforce the importance of democratic elections in June/July. Using small grants or by adjusting existing programs, such as with NDI and IRI, we were able to fund within a couple of months a series of activities implemented primarily by local organizations.

14. (SBU) Projects included public opinion polling, roundtable discussions of electoral issues, public education campaigns promoting participation, as well as extensive domestic election observation and exit polling on all the polling days. These programs were not designed to affect the results of the elections, but to help raise the level of informed debate, to confirm election results by independent observers, and more generally to add to the public sentiment that Lebanon had regained its independence and was on a path towards more fundamental reforms.

15. (SBU) Following elections, civil society identified a new electoral law as a priority area for reform and the government established an Electoral Commission to draft new legislation. MEPI quietly provided international experts through UNDP to advise the commission. MEPI programs are also providing expertise to government and political movements to improve their communications strategy and mechanisms. A MEPI-funded independent Lebanese website, set

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up one year ago to provides non-partisan news about Lebanon, is now averaging 500,000 hits per day.

16. (SBU) Our most ambitious effort yet is the result of two years of effort. Post, MEPI and our key partners have sought out organizations outside of Beirut to support grassroots work in all areas of the country, reaching the various sectarian communities, to develop a network of local partners with a genuine national reach. This network will participate in a coordinated MEPI project in which each of our Lebanese partners trains civil society activists and promotes democratic practices at its respective local level, using the same materials and methodology. At the same time, the network is available to implement coordinated campaigns on national issues, as they arise.

17. (SBU) Success in Lebanon has been achieved by collaborating closely with post to identify reform opportunities and then using MEPI's mechanisms to respond to them quickly and flexibly. Dynamic civil society partners and a permissive environment made it easier. The political context remains fragile, to say the least, and could affect the programs, short-term impact. Their long-term relevance, however, seems assured.

Algeria

18. (SBU) In early 2006, Algeria seemed like the perfect test case for MEPI. In many ways, the country appeared to be turning a corner, putting the dark years of the 90s behind it. US-Algeria relations were growing, oil revenues had skyrocketed and the government maintained a steady discourse about the need for reform in all sectors. While the GOA had at times been sensitive about certain types of MEPI programs, it had let most of them proceed. With parliamentary and local elections planned for 2007, we decided there was an opportunity to enhance democratic practices around those events. Other ongoing MEPI programs would continue in all

pillars, but we would undertake a major new effort on the political front.

¶9. (SBU) A MEPI assessment team visited Algeria and developed a multi-project strategy. It identified US and Algerian NGO partners and \$2 million of additional MEPI funding was committed to support the new activities. The largest component was to be run by NDI, focusing on several elements of political party training. A major Algerian NGO would handle nation-wide public education and get-the-vote-out activities. A local women's rights NGO would use the election campaign as a platform on which to profile its priority issues and to pressure political parties to adopt public stances on them. As in Lebanon, the objective was not to affect the results of the elections, but to enhance the quality of campaigns, public debate and participation. Again, the Embassy, from the Ambassador on down, was committed to this strategy, and all the pieces appeared to be in place for a successful operation.

¶10. (SBU) Unfortunately, as 2006 progressed, the GOA grew cooler to political reform efforts, although its belief in reform was probably merely rhetorical to begin with. The GOA's relationship with NDI in particular unmasked the rhetoric, as NDI experienced resistance from the controlling Interior Ministry. Using visas as the bureaucratic tool, the GOA ensured that experts could not come to Algeria to train and, gradually, the NDI office was effectively shut down. The biggest part of our MEPI strategy was dead in the water and, at the same time, the GOA became stand-offish on dealing with our major Algerian NGO partner. That NGO, while one of the few with a good reputation and a national reach, also turned out to be in over its head. The training and other activities it held were not well organized and were watered down to deal with general questions of citizenship, and not the elections in particular. The results were disappointing.

Only the women's program was truly successful, bringing together political party representatives for serious public debates on priority women's issues and garnering media attention of their results.

¶11. (SBU) So, the bulk of the MEPI democracy strategy for Algeria failed to pan out. We do not, however, view the overall effort as a failure. We recognized an opportunity and developed an ambitious, but realistic, strategy to push the envelope. It did not work out because of increased government resistance and the weakness of civil society on the ground. But as noted in reftel, reform is not a linear process and each country presents its own challenges. If we are committed to reform, we need to persevere - identify the

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next opportunity, work on the next strategy. This, incidentally, is precisely what Embassy Algiers has been doing, focusing efforts now on areas where opportunities for real reform seem most tangible, such as on education, media reform, and pushing for the Parliament to become a more serious institution.

Building the Base

¶12. (SBU) A couple of MEPI's early visitor programs have been extremely popular with participants and seem to have an immediate and lasting impact on their lives, as well as others around them, once the visitors returned home. The first is the Student Leaders Program (aka MEPI Study of the United States Institutes for Undergraduate Student Leaders), which brings university students to US colleges for a summer, with a focus on leadership training and civic engagement, before returning to conduct civic projects in their home countries. The second is the Business Internship Program (BIP) for young Arab businesswomen. An intensive academic course (mini-MBA) is followed by a three-month internship in a US business relevant to their careers. Using this

successful model of a short-term mix of academic and professional experience in the US, MEPI has developed new programs in the last two years as part of our broader effort to help build the next generation of reformers in the region.

The New Generation Program, implemented by Freedom House, and the Leaders for Democracy Fellowship provide training and internship to political activists who have already begun making a mark in their respective fields. The Women's Legal and Business Network offers a cadre of professionals the opportunity to work in the US legal and business environment while learning from each other and their American counterparts.

¶13. (SBU) Some of what participants in the above MEPI programs learn in the US is starting to be replicated in the region as well. The Kawakibi Center for Democracy Transition (KADEM) was launched in 2006 with the support of a MEPI small grant. An umbrella group for over 100 Arab NGOs, it provides training and expertise, using the most effective international methods. KADEM has begun a training program for democracy activists, using the latest methods of civic mobilization, communication, and negotiation skills, as developed initially for Freedom House's New Generation Program. All of these programs are important for at least two principle reasons: 1) they bring together participants not only with American counterparts but also with others throughout the region, who can share experiences; and 2) they are having a cross-fertilization effect, in which students, lawyers, journalists, and other key members of civil society are brought into contact with each other - a critical element for sustainable change.

So What?

¶14. (SBU) Promoting reform is hard, not least because it takes a different path in each country. This doesn't mean that what worked in one place cannot be applied elsewhere, but rather that one shouldn't assume it will work in the same way or on the same timeline. Reform is also by definition about change, which threatens many established societal forces in one way or another. It is very hard to predict the dynamic among these societal actors when they are confronted by reform movements. Thus, there should be no surprise that some reform projects fail or certain strategies don't play out as expected. One might even posit that if all MEPI programs are a success, we are probably not pushing the envelope enough.

¶15. (SBU) What we have learned from these and other experiences is that certain ingredients make success more likely. First, we need a strategic approach to reform in each country of the region that outlines realistic priorities in the context of the overall relationship. Second, capable, reliable local civil society partners are perhaps the most crucial ingredient, not only for implementing successful programs, but also as the catalyst of positive change in their countries. Where such partners do not exist, we need to help build that capability. Third, good communication/coordination among posts, NEA/PI and the MEPI Regional Office ensures that our policy and program actions are in synch to avoid unpleasant surprises. Fourth, USG flexibility in developing and executing programs is essential, as circumstances on the ground change rapidly. Fifth, diplomatic support on both the general reform message

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and occasionally intervention to counter government resistance to certain activities will be necessary. Finally, persistence and consistency are essential. We have many lessons still to learn, but each effort plants seeds of hope with our partners and demonstrates our commitment to a longer-term vision of a stable, more democratic region.
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